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BORSCHT, BREAD, AND KOVBASA: Foods of Ukraine

The rich Ukrainian soil has always produced enormous amounts of wheat, earning the area the nickname "breadbasket" of Europe. And since wheat is considered a staple of life, bread is the focus of many Ukrainian traditions and rituals. Breads are not only a specialty of Ukraine, they are its most important food.

As a token of friendship, respect, and hospitality, when friends and special guests visit a Ukrainian home, they are offered a loaf of bread with a small pile of salt on top. This custom dates back 2,500 years to a time when Greeks settled in Ukraine and grew wheat there. And, since many Ukrainians believe that bread is holy, it is an important part of all family events.

Regional breads such as sour rye, as well as festival breads filled with cheese, meat, or plums, developed over the centuries. Braided breads, called kolach (koh-LACH), are the centerpiece of special meals. Formed in a ring, the bread symbolizes eternal life. Often, a candle burns at its center. Served on Christmas Eve as part of the traditional 12-dish meal, the kolach contains honey and sour cream. Dipped in salt and honey, it is served to each member of the household. At Ukrainian weddings, special bread known as korovai (kor-o-VAI) is built up to form a tall cylinder. At Easter, paska (PAS-ka), an egg bread often baked in the shape of a cross, is served during the after-church festivities. A priest blesses the bread.

Potatoes are another staple. Often they are added to borscht (beet soup) or grated and fried as potato pancakes. Like many dishes from Eastern European countries, potato pancakes are often served with sour cream.

Varenyky (vah-REH-nih-kih), or dumplings (sometimes call pirogies), the most popular Ukrainian snack, are made from flour and stuffed with cheese, meat, cabbage, or other vegetables. Sweet dumplings are filled with fruit such as cherries or plums and served as desserts. Whether savory or sweet, the dumplings are often served with sour cream.

Cabbage is a favorite vegetable. Cabbage rolls (nolubsh) are made by filling large, partially cooked cabbage leaves with buckwheat, rice, and meat. The leaves are then roiled and cooked. Sauerkraut (cabbage soured with vinegar) is popular, as is cabbage soup. Other popular vegetables are cucumbers, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions, and beans. Often, cucumbers and tomatoes are served in sour cream.

Unless the vegetables are seasoned with dill, vinegar, or garlic, Ukrainian food is rarely spiced. But although spices are rare, dishes are always rich and satisfying. Most Ukrainian specialties are based on traditional peasant dishes and have a base of grains and staple vegetables such as potatoes, beets, or cabbage. Dishes are prepared by boiling, frying, or stewing the ingredients. Many dishes are meatless. Such vegetarian dishes developed during the days when Ukrainian Christians did not eat meat or dairy foods during Lent, the 40 days before Easter.

Pork, the most popular meat, is eaten as ham, bacon, and a sausage known as kovbasa

(kohv-bas-AH). Sometimes the pork is ground and formed into patties. Salo (SA-low), pork lard, is often spread on bread instead of butter. For added flavor, garlic or chopped bacon is sometimes added to the lard.

Ukrainians also enjoy chicken. For one dish, chicken is baked in sour cream and then served with potatoes and mushrooms. Chicken Kiev, an internationally known specialty, originated in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. It consists of chicken breasts stuffed with butter, then rolled in flour and deep-fried.

Holidays are a time for special dishes. Orthodox Ukrainians celebrate Christmas according to the Julian calendar, on January 7. The festivities begin on Christmas Eve when a special supper is served. Superstition dictates that everyone in the family must taste all 12 traditional dishes. Kutya (koot-YAH), a honey, nuts, poppy seed, and boiled wheat dish, is always served, as is uzvar (ooz-VAHR), stewed fruit. Borscht is always included, as are fried and pickled fish, cabbage rolls, dumplings, and a variety of vegetables. On Christmas day, it is traditional for married couples to visit the home of one of their parents. On arrival, they are greeted at the door with a pot of kutya.

Although Ukrainian and Russian foods are similar, the people of the Ukraine have developed many of their own specialties, or have created their own versions of Russian recipes. To truly enjoy Ukrainian food, you need to visit a Ukrainian home either in Ukraine or in the United States. Not only will you be treated with warm hospitality, you will be served a wide variety of delicious foods.

Did You Know?

Many Ukrainian women still follow the tradition of wearing a kerchief on their head once they marry.

PHOTO (COLOR): When fruits and vegetables are in season, they can be bought rather cheaply from sidewalk vendors.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Ukrainian farm woman washes radishes.

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By Ann Stalcup

Ann Stalcup is a frequent contributor to FACES.

### **Poppy Seed Cakes: A Ukrainian Christmas Treat**

#### **You need:**

½ pound (2 sticks) of butter or margarine  
1 1/3 cups light brown sugar  
3 eggs  
¾ cup poppy seeds  
1 cup milk  
3 teaspoons baking soda

2 cups unbleached flour

½ teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon lemon rind

½ teaspoon vanilla

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Grease two medium-size loaf pans with a little butter or margarine.
3. In a saucepan, heat milk and poppy seeds, removing from heat just before liquid boils. Let liquid cool until it reaches room temperature.
4. Beat the sugar and butter together until it is creamy. Add eggs one at a time, beating the mixture after you add each egg. Add the poppy seed and milk mixture.
5. Sift together baking soda, unbleached flour, and salt, then add them to the other ingredients.
6. Stir in the lemon rind and vanilla.
7. Bake in the greased pans for 40 to 50 minutes. Test a loaf by pricking it with a toothpick. The toothpick will come out clean if the cake is completely cooked.

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By A.S.

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